

The High Impact Potential of Informal Influence

By: Frank Wagner, Ph.D



Like many professionals today, you may often be asked to influence in situations where you lack formal authority. Results in these situations will be achieved only with the willing cooperation of others. In other words, your success is interdependent with others. People may or may not choose to act interdependently. This creates both a challenge and an opportunity for informal leadership.

In its simplest form, leadership is the process of influence. In essence, every attempt we take to influence is an attempt to lead. Since power is our influence potential, it is useful to think about power in assessing our likelihood of success as an influencer. The actual success we experience while influencing is directly related to the power others give us. If someone thinks you lack power, you don't have it. If they think you have power, then you do. So,

it is what people perceive that guides their actions. Effective influencers are perceived as powerful people, with the ability to impact the thoughts and actions of others. We earn our power through the way we act and how we talk. All leaders earn their power day by day.

Keys to Informal Influence

How influencers possess power is largely the byproduct of their own behavior. Three interconnected sets of behavior help influencers earn the right to lead. Each of these components can stand alone; and used together, the synergy enhances that power. Where you start in developing your power is up to you. In a new situation, consider starting the process by becoming clear on your aim. What are

your desired outcomes? What is going on in this situation that can help you achieve your aim and what may get in your way? There are things in your environment that will affect your success. There are also things within you. What are the forces at play and what power do you have to influence?

As Buckminster Fuller said, "Clarity is power." **How well are you clearly aiming with awareness?**

Once you are clear on your aim, the next step is **aligning** with the other person based upon awareness of their situation, needs, and constraints. The process of aligning is affected greatly by the credibility you establish with the person, your degree of helpfulness as they perceive it, and the quality of the relationship. You want to act in ways that enhance and build your credibility and helpfulness, and the relationship.

Helping others is what sound interpersonal influence is all about. You are more successful when seeking others' assistance for what you are trying to accomplish after helping them with their needs and agenda. Reciprocity is a basic human process that crosses all cultures. In helping others it is useful to:

- Share your expertise and support to goals that others find important.
- Respond quickly and constructively to requests others make of you (thus setting the stage for reciprocity).
- Keep others posted as to what is happening.

Building relationships is essential to constructing the foundation for the give-and-take that is essential to all human affairs. Treating every

individual as an ally, and as a person deserving respect, will set the stage for needed trust and cooperation. Again according to Buckminster Fuller, "Integrity is the basis of everything long lasting." Aligning is best achieved when you are being authentic.

Almost every behavior either adds value to a relationship or detracts from it. Additionally, the wise person takes into account the pressures others face prior to any request for assistance, not putting his or her own needs ahead of the others' needs and priorities. Working diligently to establish credibility, help others, and build the relationship all lay the groundwork for the other sets of behaviors. Once you have a clear aim and are properly **aligned with authenticity**, it is time to *take action*.

Effective action changes the status quo in a way that provides value. We all have limited energy and resources. The more accurate and precise the action you take, the less energy is required to achieve your desired aim. Build your reputation for being a doer, for making things happen in a way that earns the respect and trust of others.

Remember, the actions you take must be perceived as contributing to what others feel is important. Ultimately, they are not motivated by what is only good for you. The results of our actions will either earn trust or undermine it. As with the process of **aiming and aligning**, the process of **acting with accuracy** is best achieved by adhering to positively perceived behaviors while avoiding those that are perceived as coming out of self-interest.

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